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# OF GODS, MEN AND MONSTERS ON ASSYRIAN SEALS

PAULINE ALBENDA

*Serving primarily as a means to identify the owners of documents and commodities, decorated seals were used throughout the ancient Near East from the 5th millennium to the end of the 1st millennium B.C. For the modern scholar, however, these seals and seal impressions are not simply stamps showing ownership; they are a window into the social, political and religious world of ancient man.*

Clay, the one natural resource readily available in ancient Mesopotamia, provided the main ingredient for the construction of religious and secular edifices and spurred the invention of cuneiform, a unique method of writing with wedge-shaped characters, that was suitable particularly for clay surfaces. The earliest known examples of this style of writing, dated to about 3000 B.C., were found at southern Mesopotamian sites of the Sumerian period.

Parallel to the development of writing on clay tablets was the manufacture of decorated seals which were used in the Near East from the 5th millennium B.C. to the end of the 1st millennium B.C. While the clay was still soft, the designs

carved on stone seals could be impressed into the clay surface with ease. The roller-shaped cylinder seals, the most distinctive type employed in the ancient Near East, were rolled across the soft clay to produce in reverse the complete pattern of the subjects engraved on the stone. Stamp seals were less widespread and disappeared after the 3rd millennium B.C., but came back into general use after the 9th century B.C. The stonecutter fashioned the seals from a variety of stones, such as agates, rock-crystal, carnelian, jasper, chalcedony, and hematite.

Though the seals served primarily as a means to identify owners of documents and goods, seals were also treasured in antiquity as heirlooms and sometimes had prophylactic value. Some families preserved seals through generations, handing them down from father to son. From time to time, seals were reused, as is known, for example, from the Hellenistic graves of the

4th-2nd centuries B.C. at Nimrud (near the modern city of Mosul). Here cylinder and stamp seals of much earlier date were found among the votive deposits. These seals may have been obtained by the Hellenistic villagers who, in the course of trenching to secure stone and baked bricks from the 9th-7th-century Assyrian levels, found a number of seals.

One outstanding phase in the history of glyptic art concerns the seal designs from Assyria. During the whole course of Assyrian history seals continued to be employed and valued in the traditional manner. The findspots of numbers of seals or their impressions on clay bullae and tablets uncovered at various Assyrian sites furnish evidence for the significance that cylinder and stamp seals had at this time.

One notable example of the significance and use of cylinder seals is a royal document from Nimrud discovered in the Ezida (a building

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Fig. 1 A Late Assyrian cylinder seal depicting a contest scene is shown at its actual size. The seals were usually only 1.2-5.0 cm. in height.

complex which contains the temple of the god Nabu). The tablet, dealing with a contract imposed upon the vassals of the Assyrian king, Esarhaddon (679-669 B.C.), was sealed with three dynastic seals: one of the Old Assyrian Empire, period of Shamshi-Adad I (ca. 1800 B.C.); one of the Middle Assyrian period, possibly belonging to Tukulti-Ninurta I (ca. 1260 B.C.); and one which had once belonged to the king's father, Sennacherib (704-680 B.C.). These seal impressions depict a

9th through the 7th centuries B.C., the subject matter of the royal Assyrian seal remained virtually unchanged: the king, his right foot forward, grasps an upright rampant lion by its mane and, at the same time, plunges a dagger into the animal's chest. Emphasizing a theme that was expanded in greater detail among the stone reliefs that

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*Some families preserved seals through generations, handing them down from father to son.*

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royal personage worshipping before the images of various deities. Spanning more than a thousand years of Assyrian history, the three seals proclaimed the lasting divine and royal power associated with King Esarhaddon. It is remarkable that, in spite of the political alterations that Assyria experienced during those many centuries, the royal seals were highly valued, closely guarded, and carefully used by succeeding rulers.

A more practical use of the seals is demonstrated by the discovery of clay bullae, or docketts, impressed with the royal Assyrian stamp. They were attached originally to bales of cloth, bags, cloth rolls, or wooden boxes, and served as a label for the king's property. The outline of the engraved sealing was always circular (fig. 2). From the



Fig. 2 Assyrian king attacking an upright lion. Circular royal stamp seal impression on clay tablet, from Khorsabad, 8th century B.C. The Oriental Institute.



decorated the walls of the royal residences, the royal insignia extols the might inherent in Assyrian kingship, stressing the king's role as a hero against the most formidable of all wild beasts.

Generally, the two predominant themes in Assyrian glyptic art are contest and ritual worship scenes. As we have seen in the previous examples, both subjects were chosen for the royal seals. Numerous other seal designs displaying similar themes include not only real animals but also imaginary and hybrid creatures which may have had religious significance. Although there existed a developed pantheon in Sumerian and Babylonian religion from the time of the earliest written records, the ordinary man saw himself surrounded by gods and demons. Not all demons were dreaded and malevolent, however, for there existed *utukku*-spirits, well-disposed counterparts of other various demon species. During excavations at Assyrian sites, many clay figurines have been discovered in boxes under the floor to protect the house and residents; these include figures with human bodies and the heads and wings of birds, and representations of the *Mushrushshu*, or red dragon, a composite creature with the body of a lion, head and neck of a serpent, and a long tail.

Other fantastic creatures such as the bull-man, scorpion-man, fish-man (*kulilu*), fish-ram (*kusariggi*), and the human figure in a fish cloak (*apkallu*) are depicted in the Assyrian seal designs. Foremost are the griffin-demon (a creature with bird-head and human body) and the winged griffin (a being with bird-head and animal body), both of which are common in Assyrian art from the Middle Assyrian period onward. While the winged griffin does not always appear as a beneficial character, the griffin-demon is always engaged in beneficial performances. On a 12th-10th-century imprint of an Assyrian seal (fig. 3), these two winged beings menacingly confront each other above a kneeling calf. Gripping one foreleg



of his opponent, the griffin-demon, armed with a dagger, stands steadfast upon the ground, indicated by a single baseline. The griffin strides forward on its hind legs in a counterattack. The oblique thrusts of their wings, the half-open beaks, and the griffin's swirling upraised tail heighten the dramatic actions of the two protagonists.

A different mood prevails in another Assyrian seal design dated to the same period (fig. 4). On this occasion a griffin-demon appears alone in a spacious area occupied by a single large palm tree. In a moment of quiet activity the winged griffin-demon is displayed plucking a tree branch (perhaps intended to represent a cluster of dates), while balancing himself with one foot upon a lower leafy branch and the other foot resting upon the ground. A cuneiform inscription of two lines terminates the scene. The careful attention given to details and modeling of the subjects on this seal continues earlier glyptic traditions.

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*The ordinary man saw himself surrounded by gods and demons.*

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To cite one such example, the imprint of a 13th-century seal (fig. 5) illustrates a contest between real creatures, an attacking lion and a



**Fig. 3** Contest between griffin and griffin-demon. Middle Assyrian cylinder seal: milky chalcedony. 12th-10th century B.C. Pierpont Morgan Library.

**Fig. 4** Griffin-demon tearing branch from tree. Middle Assyrian cylinder seal: pink sard. 12th-10th century B.C. Pierpont Morgan Library.



**Fig. 5** Lion attacking a stag that is ascending a hill. Middle Assyrian cylinder seal: pink chert. 13th century B.C. Pierpont Morgan Library.



retreating stag. With knowledgeable skill the artist distinguishes between the brutish power of the roaring lion and the nimble movements of the dappled stag which is beginning to falter before a tree-topped mountain, indicated by a pattern of scales. A bird swooping down from above toward the many-branched tree completes the setting.

Depicting both ritual and contest scenes, a cylinder seal of the late Assyrian period (9th-7th century B.C.), on which two separate themes appear, shows an unusual battle between man and beast (fig. 6). The outcome of the struggle involving a



**Fig. 6** Hero attacking an ostrich, and scene of fish-skin men worshipping before a sacred tree. Late Assyrian cylinder seal: carnelian. 8th-7th century B.C. Pierpont Morgan Library.



**Fig. 7** Four-winged figure grasping two winged bulls. Late Assyrian cylinder seal: jasper. 9th-7th century B.C. British Museum.



**Fig. 8** King worshipping before sacred tree, followed by winged genius. Late Assyrian cylinder seal: jasper. 9th-7th century B.C. British Museum.

man on foot and an ostrich is evident. With bold actions the human protagonist, armed with quiver and scimitar, grasps the bird by its neck immediately below the small round head, as the creature kicks futilely to free itself from its attacker. In the field above the bird is an eight-pointed star, the emblem of the goddess Ishtar. Wearing a wide headband decorated with discs, the hero is attired in a long robe over a short kilt. He may represent the Assyrian king, several of whom in their historical records report of the hunt and capture of numbers of *MAL-SHIR* birds, possibly to be identified with the swift-footed, flightless ostrich. The hero-type motif is repeated on another Assyrian seal (fig. 7), but on this occasion a winged figure stands triumphantly with both arms outstretched and clutches in each hand an upright winged bull by its foreleg. The heraldic composition is enhanced by the many carefully executed details.

Scenes of worship are as varied in content as the contest scenes. One important worship category emphasized the so-called "sacred tree." Always centrally placed in the composition, the tree consisted of a columnar structure topped with broad leaves, and from the sides projected a series of branches having either leaf or pomegranate terminals; one variant shows the branches interlaced to form an elaborate trellis. Flanking the sacred tree appear various personages, the most notable of whom is the Assyrian king in his official robes standing with the gesture of adoration. In one example (fig. 8), the double image of the king grasps the wavy ribbonlike tendrils that extend down from the winged disc poised above the sacred tree. Out of the disc emerges the anthropomorphic figure of the national god, Assur. Behind the king appears a winged griffin-demon holding a vessel and cone. Rows of cuneiform fill the upper portion of the seal design. This scene recalls a similar theme carved upon a large limestone slab which was placed

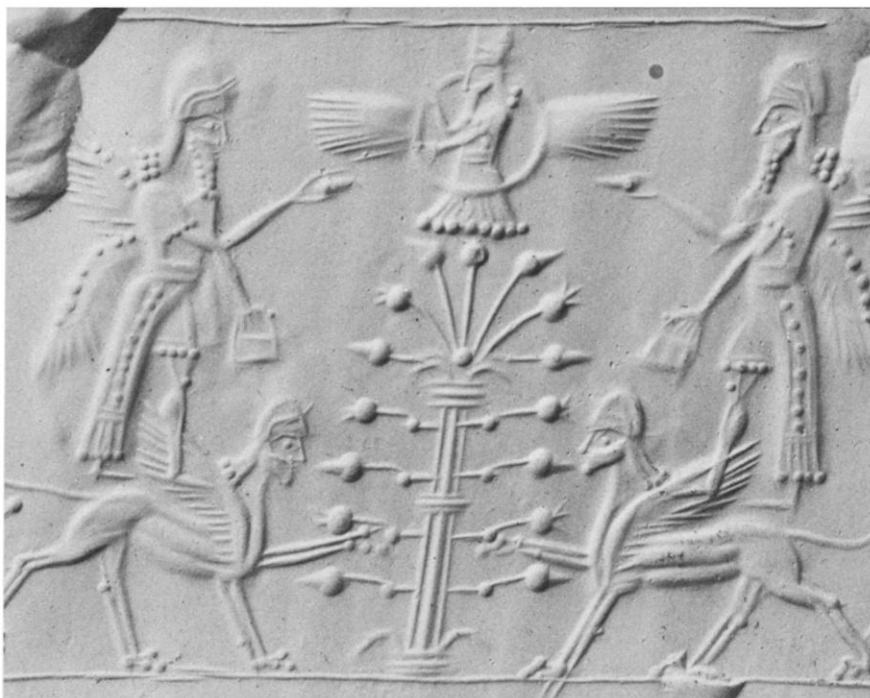


originally in a recess behind the throne of the 9th-century Assyrian king, Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.), thus affirming the religious character of the subject matter on the seal.

On another seal (fig. 9), various elements have been combined to produce a symmetrical arrangement. On each side of the sacred tree with its pomegranate terminals stands a winged genius holding a basket in one hand and a cone in the other hand that is raised toward the emblem of the god Assur. The genius stands on the back of a striding sphinx which faces the sacred tree and elevates one foreleg to touch the plant. Unlike the typical Assyrian human-headed winged bull (*lamassu*) and human-headed winged lion (*shedû*) which always appear with full-length curled beards and horned head-dresses, the sphinxes on this seal seem to possess short, pointed beards and wear plain, round caps. Such details make it evident that the hybrid creatures on this seal belong to a type that is foreign in origin.

Of exceptional interest are the human figures clothed in fish-skin (fig. 6). One each side of a small sacred tree stands the double image of the fish-garbed man (*apkallu*), probably a priest who performs a ritual before the sacred emblems. The fish-skin covering the body may have once belonged to a real aquatic creature such as the dugong, a sea mammal which was known in the Eastern Mediterranean and found in the Red Sea. Above the columnar plant appears the god Assur emerging from the winged sun disc. The ceremonial scene is completed by the inclusion of a worshipper who stands with both hands raised to his face in a gesture of devotion.

A variant of the worship theme occurs upon a skillfully worked late Assyrian seal (fig. 10) which has as its main subject a long-robed worshipper doing homage before the image of the goddess Ishtar. The goddess, clothed in her warlike guise with quivers and long sword, stands atop an openmouthed recumbent lion. In her left hand is a bow held upright and two arrows

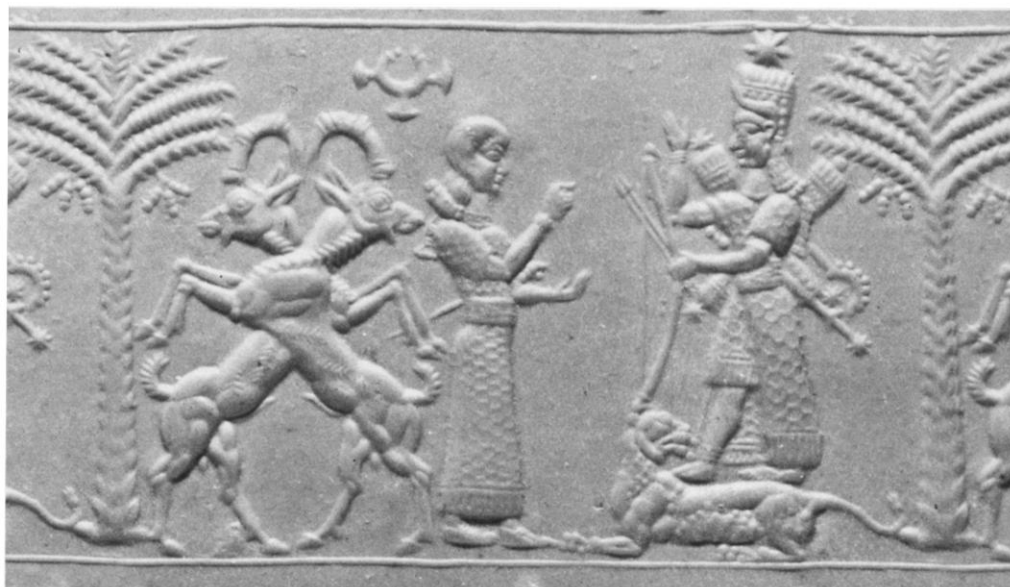


**Fig. 9** Sun-god in winged disc above sacred tree. Flanking the tree a winged figure stands upon the back of a sphinx. Late Assyrian cylinder seal: pink jasper. 9th-7th century B.C. British Museum.

with tips pointed up. This last detail may symbolize a successful battle, since the monumental stone wall reliefs dealing with the aftermath of the hunt and war depict Ashurnasirpal II, Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 B.C.), and Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) grasping the bow and arrows in the same manner. The portrayal of Ishtar as goddess of war recalls the special importance that this deity had for the 7th-century king, Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.), who

invoked her divine powers in his successful battles against the Elamite foes. Other motifs on the seal include the crossed ibexes rising on their hind legs, their heads twisted to face in the opposite direction; these animals fill the narrow space between the worshipper and a date palm. In the field above appears a triple-armed earring of a type that was known in Assyria in the 8th century B.C..

**Fig. 10** A beardless person worshipping the goddess Ishtar. Late Assyrian cylinder seal: green chalcedony. 8th-7th century B.C. British Museum.





**Fig. 11** On one side of a table appears a king with bow and bowl in hand. Before him stands an attendant with a fan. Late Assyrian cylinder seal: steatite. From Nimrud. 9th-8th century B.C. British Museum.

A simplified rendering of a ceremonial scene, bordered by horizontal lines, shows an attendant and a bearded person before an animal-footed stand (fig. 11). The heavyset figure on the right holds a shallow cup in the upraised hand and grips an upright bow in the other hand. He is attired in a long garment covered by a fringed shawl, similar to that worn by Assyrian kings. The beardless attendant faces the worshipper and raises a square fan above the laden table. His military status is attested by the long sword at his side and the round shield carried over his back. The shield is drawn in profile to reveal the metal bosses that project from its surface. This type of shield was occasionally handled by Assyrian soldiers and their allies in the 9th and 8th centuries, as evidenced in scenes of warfare on the monumental bas-reliefs. Although no divine image or its emblem appears, nonetheless we know from other sources that a ritual ceremony associated with the

successful hunt or battle is here depicted. In the monumental arts Assyrian rulers, surrounded by their attendants, were portrayed in a similar attitude. Nearby, there oftentimes appeared a defeated

enemy kneeling at the feet of the king, or bulls or lions killed in the hunt. On one bas-relief which displays King Ashurbanipal performing the ritual ablution before a table laden with food, the shallow cup is tilted to reveal the liquid flowing downward in twisted motions above the bodies of four dead lions. Most probably during such rites of ablution the deities Assur and Ishtar were invoked. It was, therefore, unnecessary to include their emblems on the seals illustrating these ceremonies since their divine presence already was implied.

From what we have observed above, Assyrian seals picture a world animated not only with naturalistic beasts but also with imaginary creatures whose standardized shapes imbued them with a special kind of reality. The affairs of man, as depicted on the seals, were restricted to those actions that emphasized his heroic qualities. The scenes of worship suggest the kinds of rituals that were performed by king and priest. They reveal, too, man's awareness of his reliance upon the greater powers of divine authority for protection and leadership.

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